2021 Workforce Trends Survey Report

Workforce productivity lessons from Covid-19

Introduction

Working practices changed overnight during the Covid-19 pandemic. New digital technology, including Cloud-based software solutions and online conferencing tools, has enabled millions to continue their day-to-day work with minimal disruption.

Now that most of the restrictions have been lifted in the UK, remote working has given way to a hybrid model. Different organisations are finding their own ways to strike the right employee balance between home-based and office-based working. With growing numbers of workers saying they would like to find a new job, this is a crucial time for employers to get hybrid working right – or risk seeing valued and experienced staff voting with their feet.

Our report provides insights into the way the last year has impacted on employees and managers, revealing the lasting improvements which many are embracing and spotlighting the threats to mitigate from the experience. It also shines a light on the things that matter more than ever to employees and the changing expectations they have of their employers. We have identified some emerging trends in the way we work now and can gauge how reactions to these, by employees and managers, may shape the way we work into the future.
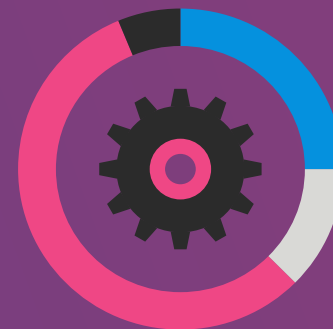
Emerging trends

1. **Multi-tasking is over (pg 2-4)** – People need chunks of time to focus, without distraction and constant changing of hats, to be most productive.

2. **The work-life balance myth (pg 5-8)**– The flexibility of remote working is accompanied by other challenges, including blurred lines between home and work life.

3. **The Covid generation (pg 9-11)**– Entry level and young employees have found remote working more difficult without in-person interactions and mentoring.

4. **Leadership during a pandemic (pg 12-14)** – Managers are under more pressure, giving extra time to their teams while meeting their own deadlines.

5. **Future working habits (pg 15-18)**– Hybrid working must be carefully planned, with the best technology tools and strategies to support employees and managers.

Multi-tasking is over

It used to be that multi-taskers were lauded as eminently capable and highly efficient. It was something many aspired to, with people proud of their own perceived ability to multi-task. They may be surprised, therefore, to learn that recent research suggests a massive 98% of the population don't multi-task very well. It is not an efficient way to work. Some researchers, including Meyer, Evans and Rubenstein, suggest that multi-tasking actually reduces productivity by up to 40%. And Stanford University researcher, Clifford Nass, found heavy multi-taskers fared worse at distinguishing relevant information from irrelevant details.
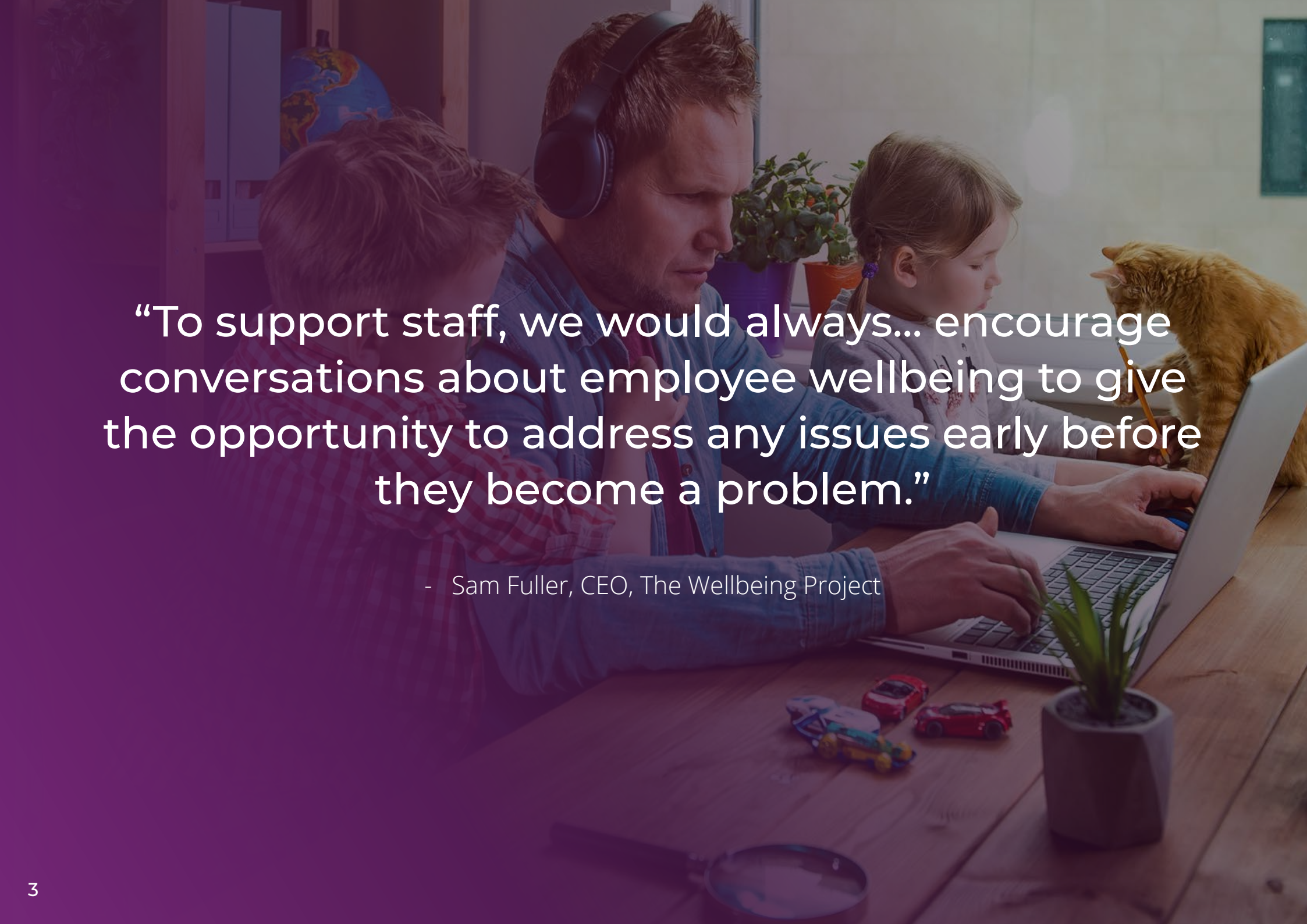
Spinning many plates at once may seem to be a good way to get a lot of things done quickly, but cognitive ability is impaired as our brains don't actually handle the constant switching from one focus to the next very well. The phenomenon is called 'attention residue', and it means that the focus required for one task serves as a distraction from the others, so that none of the tasks are completed to as high a level as they would be if tackled in isolation.

Focus, clarity and simplicity are essential for more effective and efficient working, requiring a physical workspace and digital desktop that are free from distractions. Our survey reveals that less than half (49%) have a dedicated workspace when working from home, with a quarter working from their living room. It's not surprising then, that 22% say they have so many distractions that their working day is never spent fully on actual work. If this is a consequence of remote working, then it suggests employers need to consider introducing strategies to support more focused ways of working.

69%

say the number of business software/apps they use at work has increased during the pandemic

"To support staff, we would always... encourage conversations about employee wellbeing to give the opportunity to address any issues early before they become a problem."

- Sam Fuller, CEO, The Wellbeing Project

Multi-tasking is over

Multi-tasking is also pretty stressful – it can often feel quite frantic and overwhelming. Employees are using more intuitive technology tools to help them work smarter, with 69% saying the number of business software/apps they use at work has increased during the pandemic. But here too, it seems that people are struggling to distinguish the wood from the trees. 32% say there are too many distractions from alerts and messaging tools, while 17% say their productivity is being held back by having too many business apps. Workers are now faced with too much technology and notifications, suggesting we are now reaching technology saturation, which is slowing down productivity and stopping people from getting on with what they ought to be doing. 26% turn off their email for one hour to focus on urgent work, suggesting that even email, necessary for communication and engagement, can also be just one of many technological distractions.

32%

say that too many notifications from messaging tools is also holding them back from being productive at work

Takeaway:

Support staff with clearly defined objectives and goals that help them stay focused on the things that really matter. Look at ways to provide them with time and space to remove or reduce distractions and ensure there is a clearly defined communication strategy to support this across the entire organisation. Consider digital solutions that have a single sign-in for multiple applications, doing away with repeated alarms and reminders that interfere with focus. The easier it is for employees to navigate around their desktop and within the software they use every day, the more efficient they can be.

The work-life balance myth

The pandemic has shown that we want to spend more time with family and doing the things we love. When thinking about a return to the office, 47% of employees are worried about maintaining a work-life balance – almost double that of those worried about keeping their job. These findings suggest that for many, the work-life balance has improved with remote working. Swapping commuting time for the opportunity to take the kids to school, using lunchtime for a walk outside, even saving money on train tickets, coffee-shop cappuccinos and work clothes, has been a bonus for many people who are now reluctant to surrender those benefits.

Employers are now looking at ways to reconfigure working scenarios which will give their employees the best of both worlds, delivering productivity along with time to spare, to focus on family and wellbeing. Flexibility is the word of the moment. In the survey, 30% reported that they were working more hours on certain days to build in more balance and leisure time on others. Nearly one in three said they would like to see their boss trial a four-day working week.

In June 2021, dating app Bumble announced it was giving all of its staff one week off, with full pay and the instruction to fully switch-off, in order to counter what it described as 'collective burnout'. Staff already had the option to work as flexibly as they wanted to, provided they got the work done. Other organisations are taking a similar approach to help employees take time out. At Advanced, for example, we are giving employees Friday afternoons off during the summer, while other organisations such as Kickstarter are trialling four-day weeks, and some have given up the leases on offices to provide for smaller on-site teams or even switched to a remote-first model, like Spotify with its 'Work From Anywhere' policy.

When thinking about a return to the office,

47%

are worried about maintaining a work-life balance – almost double that of those worried about keeping their job

"We've seen a great sense of self-realisation over the last 18 months about the way in which we work and that one size doesn't fit all. Over the last year and a half we have looked closely at what makes us tick."

- Marshah Dixon-Terry, Career & Leadership Coach and Organisational Development Consultant, MDT Career Coaching

The work-life balance myth

However, flexibility may be proving to be a double-edged sword for many workers. 54% said their employer had expected them to do something outside of contracted working hours as a matter of urgency, suggesting a continuing erosion of the barrier between work and home time. Being able to check emails and messages on our phones and tablets means it is harder than ever to 'switch off' from work. Legislation to counter 'always on' culture in other European countries, including Ireland, France and Germany, gives workers the right to disconnect. They can refuse to respond to communications outside of working hours and at weekends without the fear of being penalised or, for example, being overlooked for a promotion.

At first glance, the right to disconnect appears to operate at odds with the current wishes of many for more flexibility over the hours they work, despite its purpose - to help protect workers' health and wellbeing. Any conflict between the right to 'switch off' and the desire for more flexibility can be resolved by changing the emphasis in productivity from roles to tasks. As more companies adopt hybrid working, they should be thinking about the nature of the task and empowering people to do the important tasks in the way that works best.

For example, onboarding an employee is indeed perfectly possible to do remotely, but is probably better done in person. Under an effective hybrid model those involved in each task should be empowered to think about the desired outcome and do the work in whatever manner best supports that outcome – from home, in the office, during the day, in the evening, whatever works best. People should then be judged on their output. This is how you reconcile the right to switch off with the desire for more flexibility – it's actually a desire to be trusted to do the work in the best way to support the outcome, which then allows for flexibility and legitimises their right to decide.

Worryingly, only 37% of respondents in our survey said that working from home has had a positive impact on their mental health. This is surprising as many claim that the pandemic allowed people to harness a better work-life balance. The truth may be that despite the benefits of remote working, the inherent flexibility also means we are working harder and for longer and people are starting to feel the strain.

The work-life balance myth

Our respondents told us that 38% of them were taking less sick leave, and on the surface this may seem like good news for employers keen to maintain productivity. The drop might be because people who aren't mixing – in the office, on public transport and even in their private lives - are not catching so many communicable illnesses. It may be, however, that people are finding it difficult to switch off from work, even when they're feeling unwell, as they can carry on working from home. If so, this is another risk factor for employers, who need to ensure that the pressure to keep going does not take its toll on employee wellbeing.
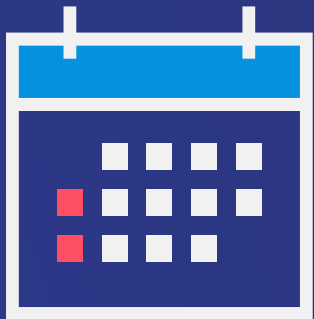
Nearly

1 in 3

would like to see their boss trial a four-day working week

Takeaway:

Productivity is rooted in wellbeing – people don't perform at their best if they are continually putting in extra hours. Assess software that streamlines day-to-day tasks and provides people with more time to get the important things done, reducing the need for out-of-hours or extended working. Alongside this, quality performance management software can provide leaders with real clarity on each employee, helping them to set realistic and achievable targets and reduce burnout. By setting clear goals, providing regular feedback and having good quality conversations, wellbeing and productivity performance will improve.

The Covid generation

The pandemic has had a negative impact on all age groups, but it's possibly the 18-24 year-olds who have been hit the hardest.

With GSCEs and A' level exams cancelled in 2020, many had to accept the grades awarded by tutors without having the opportunity to raise their grades with last-minute exam cramming. Schools, colleges and universities delivered courses online, leaving many students feeling isolated, disengaged and unsupported. For those entering the workplace for the very first time, there was no in-person onboarding or training. Instead of starting their new jobs alongside other new starters, and being able to quickly bond with the people around them, they faced the challenge of trying to build new working relationships with colleagues online. Moving to a new location for a job may have involved setting up home with strangers, sharing a house or flat with people who were all possibly jostling for a quiet space where they could work from home.

One in four of this age group have been using their bedroom as a home workspace, according to our research, a situation that is far from perfect. It doesn't promote clear boundaries between working and personal life and can also lead to increased feelings of isolation and cabin-fever. Also, 64% of 18-24 year-olds and 66% of millennials say that they have been asked to perform urgent tasks outside of working hours, more than for the average: 54%. This suggests that some managers expect younger employees to put in extra unpaid hours, and perhaps implies that lack of experience, confidence, or job security, makes it harder for them to refuse. It may also indicate that this age group is currently less productive, because of the challenges they have faced during the pandemic.
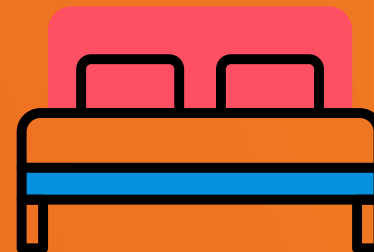
1 in 4

18-24 year-olds use their bedroom when working from home

The Covid generation

Many young people may struggle with putting together the basics they need to work from home, such as an adequately-sized desk, effective technology or even just sufficient peace and quiet from noisy flatmates or other family members. They need their employers to provide them with the best tools for the job. Three-quarters of 18-24 year-olds say they would like to be able to influence their organisation's decision to adopt technologies. Perhaps surprisingly for the digital-native generation, 51% of 18-24 year olds and 49% of millennials feel that the software/apps they use at work are hindering their productivity. It may be that the software they have been given isn't up to scratch or that they have too many tools, which are poorly designed and don't work together to properly support the employee experience. They may also need more mentoring support to ensure they get the most out of the software. Fully integrated solutions place the employee at the centre of the system design, promoting optimum efficiency and productivity.

At the start of the pandemic, many business leaders feared that full-scale working from home would reduce productivity and encourage people to underperform. It has since been widely demonstrated that the opposite is true and that employees who were trusted by their managers to get on with their work from home, did so very well. Trust engenders mutual respect. However, a fifth of this younger group say a lack of autonomy and trust from their manager is holding them back from being more productive at work. This could be because, as new-starters, they did not have the time, pre-Covid-19, to build the sort of strong, trusting working relationships that have supported more established colleagues. It points to a possible gap in adequate training and mentoring for this group, as on average more than half (55%) of all ages believe they are trusted to work remotely and are as productive at home as in the workplace.

Only 37% of 18-24 year-olds say their manager has introduced regular check-ins since working from home over the last 12 months, indicating that many feel they have been left to their own devices. Regular check-ins are important as a fundamental way to engage with employees and also to monitor how well they are coping with their work, as well as identifying actual productivity issues. Performance management tools give managers a clear view of the way an employee is working and how much additional support they may need.
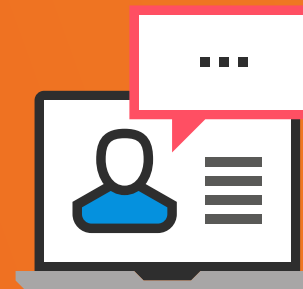
Only
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The Covid generation

Only 11% of 18-24 year-olds say the business software/apps available to them at work improve team collaboration. This suggests that, for the younger generation, technology may not be a replacement for human-to-human interaction and many would feel more productive and effective if they were back in the office. This is a group that requires managers to double-down on support for employees at the early stages in their careers, ensuring their ideas are heard. It is important to use regular and effective two-way communication to foster a culture of inclusion, helping younger employees to develop their networks and connections, allowing them to properly establish their role in the organisation and thrive.

As a group, younger employees are keen to return to office-based working, with 50% of them wanting to be back, but even this group only want to return for 50% of the time. When thinking about a return to the office, 30% of 18-24 year-olds are worried about keeping their job. They are less worried about the commute (20%) and whether the office is even safe enough to return (also 20%).

Takeaway:

Young and entry-level employees need additional support to help them build and develop key skills, including soft skills that are bolstered during regular interactions with colleagues and mentors. Organisations should provide clear guidelines for hybrid working and organise the work to support better outcomes for new and inexperienced employees. Check-ins, team meetings and other regular communications allow managers to maintain regular contact, offering support and guidance while also boosting confidence and encouraging self-determination.

Leadership during a pandemic

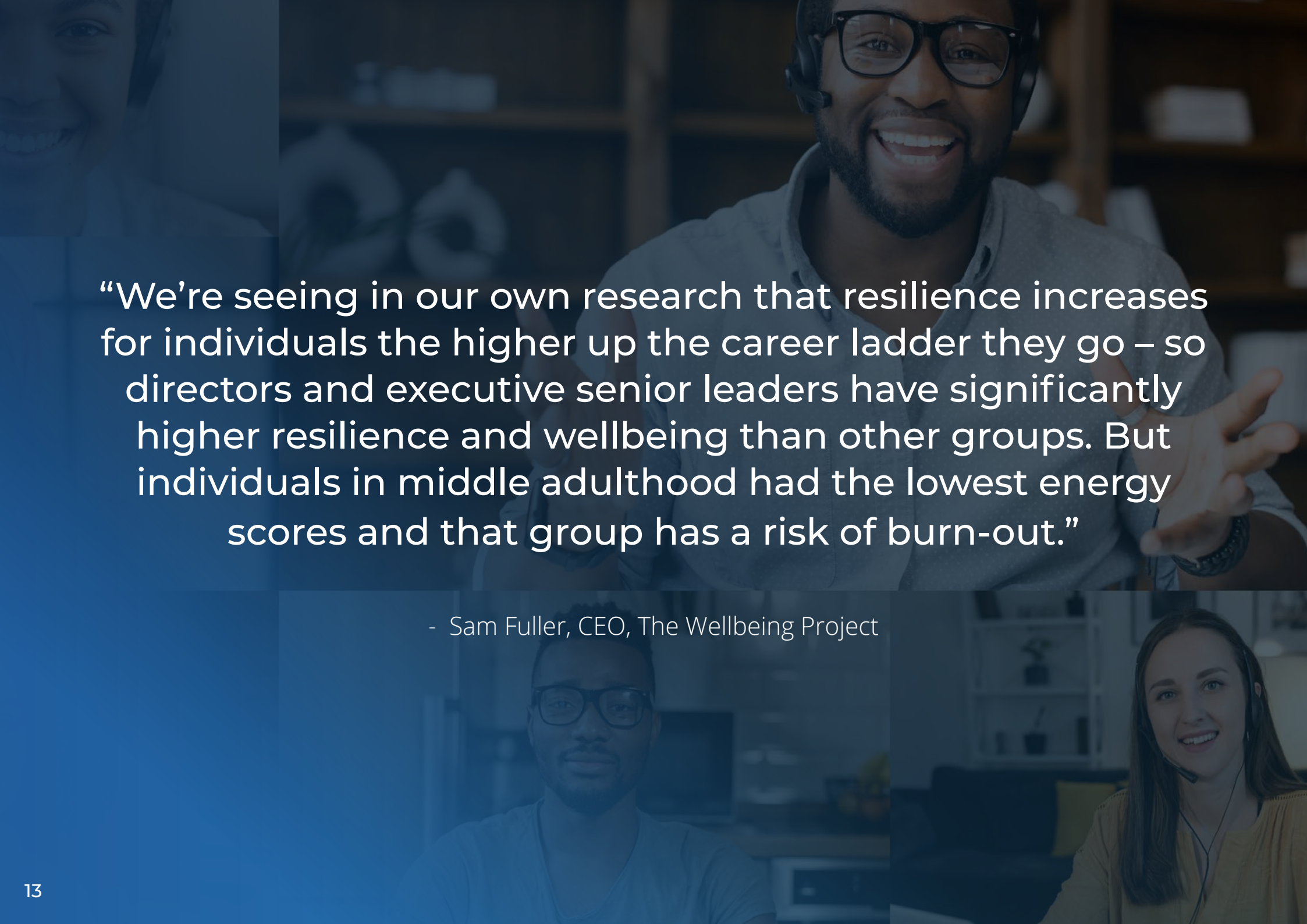In order to support their staff most effectively, managers have had to change their approach and extend their own skillset this year. People have felt isolated and out of touch with colleagues, while others have found it hard to stay disciplined. What's reassuring is that employers have stepped up in this time of crisis – they are spending more time with their staff and they are listening to their needs. In fact, 71% of employees say their boss has done a good, or very good job in communicating with employees.

Since their team has been working from home, many managers are reporting that they have had to change their leadership style. Almost half (48%) say they are spending more time providing reassurance and feedback, four out of ten are giving more flexibility on deadlines, 39% are now providing clearer direction of tasks and projects and 34% are spending more time on setting and reviewing tasks. This may be evidence that communicating remotely with staff takes more time and requires a greater degree of detail and clarity with instructions, as the nuances of face-to-face conversation are absent.
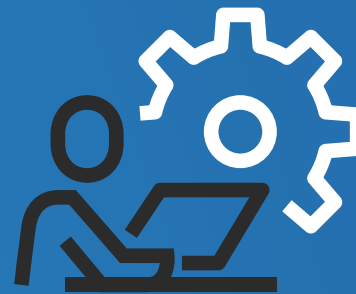
83%

of people feel their boss is listening to their ongoing technology needs – this is reassuring and shows that they have the power to influence decision making

"We're seeing in our own research that resilience increases for individuals the higher up the career ladder they go – so directors and executive senior leaders have significantly higher resilience and wellbeing than other groups. But individuals in middle adulthood had the lowest energy scores and that group has a risk of burn-out."

\- Sam Fuller, CEO, The Wellbeing Project

Leadership during a pandemic

Our report also shows that 54% of managers are spending 50% more of their time with their staff to ensure they are engaged and productive which points to an increased pressure on managers' time and a potentially difficult balancing act. They need to find more time to support employees while continuing their own responsibilities for initiatives and other leadership tasks. All of this means that managers may be at risk from burn-out and need to introduce strategies that help them get the job done, without having to resort to working extra hours out of contracted time and letting their personal lives suffer. Leaders need to ensure they take steps to protect their own wellbeing too.

71%

say their employer has done a good or very good job in communicating with employees

Takeaway:

Digital software solutions that unify business systems and provide real-time, on-demand reports can speed up and simplify management tasks. Leaders have access to immediate actionable insights, leaving more time in their day to communicate with and support their teams

Future working habits

Remote working has actually improved performance for many people. Our report found that 87% say their performance has not suffered as a result of working remotely, while four in ten believe it has improved. While data from elsewhere presents other views on this, and some organisations do not draw the same conclusions as their employees, our report suggests there is a clear appetite for hybrid working in the long-term.

While 70% of workers in our survey want to return to the office, only 6% want to do this on a full-time basis. There is no consensus on the exact split, but if a blended model is the way forward, 60% want to see a clear policy around hybrid working. They want to know exactly what is expected of them. Our survey also reveals that 60% of people would invest in a dedicated working space if their employer introduced a hybrid working policy.

Organisations that don't offer sufficient flexibility for hybrid working may find their workforce voting with their feet and going elsewhere. Our data shows there is a significant attrition risk to getting hybrid working wrong and 50% of employees are considering looking for a new role. Companies who don't respect this shift in expectation or see the demand for hybrid working are most at risk.

70%
of people want to return to the office

"For me the future is flexible, it has to be! But there needs to be an agenda change. We used to ask why we would work from home, now we ask, why would we come into the office? So we need to live and breathe this transition to flexibility and use technology to help understand how we work, which days we work from home and which days we come into the office."

- Alex Arundale, Chief People Officer, Advanced

Future working habits

What's more, companies can't get the return to office wrong – especially when we consider that many employees still have anxieties about going into the workplace. In the eventuality of returning to the office, 27% are worried about mixing face-to-face with colleagues and 26% lack confidence about the safety of the workplace. Employers should therefore be prepared to provide reassurance with thorough workplace risk assessments, using return-to-work surveys that engage employees in the development of new policies, and re-induction processes that respond to the latest health and safety practices.

Employees need to be given access to the right tools too, which is essential in supporting effective performance. The benefits of using the right tools can already be seen. In fact, 43% of people in our survey say that the business software and apps available to them at work increase the flexibility of their working day, while 34% say they help to increase their productivity and 29% say they improve team collaboration.

Employee attitudes towards the workplace will play a part for employers in identifying the most useful digital tools and ways to reconfigure remaining office space. Our report shows 18% of workers say they haven't missed anything at all about their workplace. Of those who do, the social aspect and colleagues were the most missed at 47% and 57% respectively. Digital technology helps people to maintain connection and build a degree of social capital, but it may not be able to replace physical space altogether. Humans are social creatures and there are times when we really need to be together to bounce ideas around, motivate and energise each other. Modern workspaces must be designed to facilitate this.
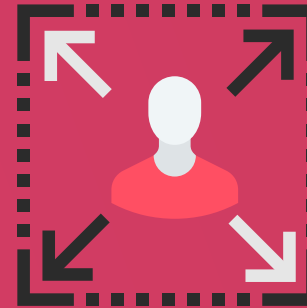
60%
of people would invest in a dedicated working space if their employer introduced a hybrid working policy

Future working habits

The concept of desk personalisation in future workspaces is important. In Matthew Syed's book 'The Power of Diverse Thinking' he discusses an experiment conducted by Craig Knight and Alex Haslam. They placed some people in standardised workplaces (called 'lean') and others in a workplace ('enriched') that had prints on the walls and plants on the desks. In this enriched setting, performance improved by 15%. When they then took a third group and let them personalise their working space ('empowered'), productivity soared by 30%. Haslam comments: "Not only does office design determine whether people's backs ache, it has the potential to affect how much they accomplish, how much initiative they take and their overall professional satisfaction… By paying more attention to employees' needs, they can boost wellbeing and productivity at minimal cost."

What's clear is that people prefer humanised spaces, are empowered by choice and do well when they can express themselves – all important things to remember when reinventing our working environments. Our survey found that, when working from home, 30% of people have personalised their deskspace to manage their wellbeing, inadvertently enacting Knight and Haslam's research findings.

Takeaway:

If working in an enriched space can have this positive impact on productivity, employers can take steps to create work-friendly and performance-boosting spaces with simple design ideas in the office. They can also encourage people to do the same when they are working remotely, creating a more pleasant home-work environment and boosting performance.

Considering the insights from the report, there is a need to shape new ways of working for everyone.

Here are some practical tips to help support productivity:

Tasks, not roles

When considering the approach to hybrid working, it may be more useful to think about tasks, not roles. Many tasks can be performed remotely, but some are so much more successfully done in person. For example, onboarding a new employee is entirely possible remotely, but the likelihood is that in many cases, it would be better done in person. Empowering employees and managers to determine how and where to best deliver relevant tasks, invests them in the decision-making which leads to more successful outcomes. Imagine a simple policy: do the task wherever and whenever it can be done best. This is far more helpful and useful than a prescriptive instruction about the number of days to be worked in the office each week.

Technology that helps, not hinders

Provide your people with technology that helps to simplify their lives, carries out repetitive tasks for them and enables them to be more productive. Avoid overwhelming them with inefficient software that is distracting or requires time-consuming shifting from one solution to another. Doing away with telephones, and using only online conference call apps is one example.

Reducing distractions

Leaders can support employees, even those working at home, by helping them to manage potential distractions. It could be that employers need to streamline teams, for example, have one single IT system that provides single sign-on, with everything in one place. Employees can have all the benefits of the various apps, without the negatives of multiple pinging, reminders and alarms.

Setting clear boundaries

Maintaining employee wellbeing is key to promoting productivity. People don't work well when they are feeling lonely, stressed, overworked and underappreciated. Strategies focused on wellbeing and setting boundaries between working and personal hours, ensure that staff take enough time away from their desks. This is the perfect moment to consider introducing new initiatives like Friday afternoons off, and being disciplined about not emailing teams outside of hours.

Promote focus

Encourage employees to set aside chunks of time, preferably at least two hours long, where people can get deeper into important and complex tasks. Without this, it's very difficult to ever properly get work done and these periods are likely to be the most productive parts of the day. If these are regular, structured time slots, it should be acceptable that employees do not respond to emails during these periods, and managers can avoid scheduling any online meetings that might pull their focus in another direction.

Supporting young employees

This group has missed out on a lot of the benefits of office-based working, such as watching more experienced colleagues tackle challenges or the camaraderie of being around other new or young employees. For many, not having an appropriate workspace at home is a real problem, and managers may be able to help with this, by supplying ergonomic chairs, standing desks or additional monitors, for example. For those who want to come into the office, leaders can ensure that appropriate safeguarding steps are taken and make use of technology, like desk-booking apps, to ensure that young people can sit near to team-mates, or mentors for appropriate day-to-day support.

Develop new leadership skills

Managers are having to spend much more time engaging with and supporting staff, but they also have their own responsibilities and tasks that have to get done. If this balance isn't handled well, managers can find themselves feeling overwhelmed and burning out. Find ways to reduce any unnecessary time-consuming activities, such as limiting the length of meetings, or using real-time performance management tools that make developing and improving the team's performance more efficient.

Do meetings matter?

Actively assess whether each meeting is necessary or something you are just doing as a default. Consider whether the topic could be better handled via email or a team channel. Even when bringing people together for brainstorming is vital, by reducing the number of meetings, managers are giving employees more flexibility in structuring their day. It frees up more time to do focused work and reduces 'meeting fatigue'. Managers and staff will feel the benefit.

Conclusion

Remote working has required a significant adjustment for some people who have spent their entire careers working in an office alongside colleagues. Many were used to a daily commute into a focused workspace, where they could easily collaborate with team-mates, engage in training, day-to-day mentoring and mutual support. But everyone is not the same.

Different home environments have meant that some find it difficult to set up a suitable workspace at home, with many people working from living rooms, kitchens and even their bedroom. This has created issues with privacy and simply lack of suitable working space. It has also, in some cases, eroded the boundaries between work and home life, with some employees feeling pressured to work through their lunch hours, into the evening and at weekends or during leave. This is particularly true for young employees.

Not being physically in the same location with colleagues has presented particular challenges for entry-level workers, who would previously have benefitted from in-person on-boarding, assimilation into company culture and having the opportunity to watch and learn from more experienced co-workers. Even with a desire to return to the office, younger employees are in the group most recently or still being vaccinated. This presents additional risk assessment and health and safety considerations for employers asking them to come into work, using public transport and working face-to-face with others.

Managers have also had to change their expectations of themselves, developing skills in engaging with and motivating remote employees, devoting more time to this while juggling their own responsibilities. Trust has been critical during the pandemic, with, in many cases, managers and co-workers having to trust employees to get on with their work, despite the distractions of their home and personal lives. Overwhelmingly, most rose to the challenge and have earned the ongoing trust of leaders and this must continue if hybrid working models are going to succeed.

Conclusion

Listening to what people need and want in order to support their productivity and wellbeing brings meaning to the planning of hybrid work. We have found there is no clear pattern to the demand for more flexibility when it comes to the split between remote and in-office working. Employers will need to listen and support flexibility on an individual basis.

Every individual is different, with varying circumstances, so their needs and preferences will be too. Seeing how people have been coping with the pressures of working from home has opened employers' eyes to the myriad of ways each responded to the situation, from home office solutions, levels of resilience, to the need for additional support and frequency of engagement. The pandemic has driven a more human, empathic and employee-centred approach. Employers that continue to communicate clearly with their people and are flexible in their way forward with each one, will be able to maximise productivity, safeguard wellbeing and retain their best talent.

Methodology

The 2021 Workforce Trends Survey research was carried out online by Research Without Barriers – RWB – between 11 June and 21 June 2021. The sample comprised 1,058 employees in decision making roles working in organisations in the UK with more than 100 employees. It also includes findings from Advanced's subsidiary company Clear Review which, in May 2021, surveyed 1,010 UK workers who have been forced to work from home during the last year but are not yet back at their usual place of work.

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